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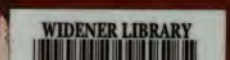

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REV. GEORGE F. SIMMONS

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REV. SAMUEL RIPLEY,

AT WALTHAM, MASS.

THE WELL-INSTRUCTED SCRIBE, OR, REFORM AND CONSERVATISM.

A

SERMON

PREACHED AT THE INSTALLATION

OF

REV. GEORGE F. SIMMONS,

AND

REV. SAMUEL RIPLEY,

AS PASTOR AND ASSOCIATE PASTOR OVER

THE UNION CONGREGATIONAL SOCIETY IN WALTHAM, MASS.

OCTOBER 27, 1841,

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SERMON.

MATTHEW XIII. 52.

EVERY SCRIBE WHICH IS INSTRUCTED UNTO THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN, IS LIKE UNTO A MAN THAT IS A HOUSEHOLDER, WHICH BRINGETH FORTH OUT OF HIS TREASURE THINGS NEW AND OLD.

One of the most universal distinctions which can be made among men, is that which divides them into conservatives and reformers. In politics, in religion, in literature, in science, in social customs, in everything which interests man, you will find these two classes. There are those who love the old, and those who love the new; those who dread change, and those who desire it; the cautious, and the hopeful; those who inquire "why the former days were so much better than these?" and those who complain, that, "since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were." There are those who look with reverence to the past, and those who look with hope to the future; those to whom the ancient world seems peopled with demigods, and the present century with pigmies; and those to whom the coming

age appears a golden time, in which mankind shall stand upon the improvements of all past ages, as on a tower almost reaching to heaven.

Based upon these two principles of reverence and hope — both of them among the noblest and most powerful which actuate the human heart—it is not strange that we should thus meet everywhere with the spirit of conservatism and of reform, and we should expect to find them very active in religion, in which reverence and hope find so much employment and food. Accordingly, we find conservatives and reformers, an old school and new school, a high church and low church, in every denomination. The most conservative sect has those in it who think it goes too fast, and the most reforming sect has those who wish it to go faster. Martin Luther was too much of a conservative for many of his followers; and I have no doubt that the Romish pope is considered by many catholics too much of a reformer, as yielding too much to the spirit of innovation. For the tendency is always to extremes. For some conservatives no one can be conservative enough; for some reformers no one can be radical enough. This is the tendency, and this is the mischief. For, according to my view, every one ought to be a conservative, and every one ought to be a reformer. The evil consists in the separation and hostility of the two principles; in loving only the old, or only the new; looking only to the past, or only to the future; having nothing but the wisdom of experience, or nothing but the wis-

dom of hope, and so being only half-wise. Christians should avoid this narrowness, for their religion reverences both what has been and what is to be. It has its roots in the remotest past. Its word was in the beginning, its author had glory with the Father before the world was, and its believers had grace given them in Christ Jesus before the world began. Yet it bears fruit in the remotest future, for it anticipates the age when every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess Jesus to be Lord; when death and hell shall be cast into the lake of fire; when time shall be no longer; when the circle of redemption shall be completed, and the Son himself being subject to Him who did put all things under him, God shall be all in all. Christians should be never so conservative as to be unwilling to improve, for progress is the very spirit of their religion, and Christ is the great reformer; they should never innovate rashly or charge hastily, for their religion accepted all that was good in the past; it is the very conservative principle, the salt of the earth; and Christ came not to destroy, but to fulfil.

On this occasion, therefore, my friends, when you are about receiving your religious teachers, I have thought it not inappropriate to consider the duties of the wise teacher, in relation to things old and new. The duty of the teacher passes over to the hearer, for if it becomes the well-instructed scribe to bring out of the treasury things new and old, it becomes the earnest hearer to receive both cheerfully; to incite and encourage his teacher to

speak both freely, not to think him a dumb dog if he does not preach every novelty, not to be startled if he sometimes says and does things a little out of the common way. Our text may be regarded as a commission from Christ himself to every teacher of his religion, to omit in his teaching nothing valuable, either old or new, but to use both, in accordance with the wants of his hearer.

I have said that Jesus Christ was both a conservative and a reformer. His first work was the same which reformers in all ages have to do, the same work which the Jewish prophets had endeavored before to do for their nation, the same work which Luther had to do afterward. Religion, in the time of Jesus, had degenerated into formality — it consisted of an outward mass of superstitious ceremonies, having a heart of unbelief within — a Pharisaic body, and a Sadducaic soul. Just so, in the time of Luther, the church had become an immense fabric of outward ceremonies and observances, with Leo X, the polite atheist, sitting at its centre. The word of Christ was a hammer and a fire to break in pieces this mass of formality. We commonly think of Jesus as being all gentleness; but to the harmlessness of the dove, he joined the strength of the eagle. His doctrine was like a sword of thrice-tempered steel, to cut sheer through the rugged prejudices, the stiff-necked obstinacy, and resolute hypocrisy, of the people and their leaders. His love was a far-seeing love, which could clothe itself with terrors as well as with smiles. Jesus, with all his

gentleness, exerted an energy which broke down the most stony mass of bigotry which has ever in this world petrified around the form of true religion.

Jesus was a reformer. The gospel, in its free spirit, in its large and unfettered charity, in its cheerful faith and unconquerable hope, was a reform which changed every view, every sentiment, every purpose which originated under the rigid, exclusive, and severe spirit of the law. And yet, bearing such a message as this, uttering such a call to liberty, announcing to the servant not only that he was free, but that he was a son and heir of God, and to partake of the divine nature, how wisely conservative was Jesus of everything good in the old dispensation! How free from haste, how regardful of time, and situation, and circumstances! The hot reformer cannot understand that feature in the character of Jesus which led him — knowing that his death was to be the signal for his religion to assume a universal character, that when he was lifted up he would draw all men unto him — led him during his life to confine his services so strictly to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But he saw that the development of events in their right times was the deepest secret of God, which even the Son could not know, which He only could know who oversees the working of that universal system of things of which each event is a separate birth. "It is not for you to know the times and the seasons which the Father has put into his own power."

Jesus, though a reformer, was not destructive, but

truly conservative. "Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil." — "The scribes and pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Whatsoever therefore they bid you observe, that observe and do, but do not ye after their works." Jesus, while announcing freedom, so announced it, as not to weaken one feeling of obligation; causing the commandment of God to appear yet broader than before. He placed it in the heart; he made love its essence; he made it rule over an inward world of thought and affection; and while he took away all that was merely scrupulous, pedantic and burdensome, he made life even more solemn, and the sense of accountability yet more profound.

Jesus was also a true conservative in this, that knowing how the roots of truth and error are entangled together in the human mind, he often forbore pulling up the tares lest he should root out the wheat also. He trusted generously to the power of truth to outgrow and conquer error. Instead of attempting to correct all the mistaken notions in the minds of the Jews concerning his kingdom, he used them to lead them to the truth, knowing that there was a leaven of truth in all; he brought them through the shadows of the old covenant to the realities of the new; through what they knew to what they did not know. By means of the old facts of life, the familiar sights of nature, and the historical associations and belief of the nation, he led them to the new facts and sights of an inner and higher

world. "Have ye understood all these things? said he. And they answered Yea Lord. Then said he to them *Therefore*" — have ye understood them — because every well-instructed teacher brings out of his mental treasure things new and old, helping his hearers on from the known to the unknown, from the outward to the inward, from the temporal to the eternal.

In all this the wise teacher of Christianity will imitate his Master. If he wishes to do good, to exert the greatest amount of spiritual influence, to make his talents effectual in his master's service, he will possess and use things old and new. He will not suffer himself to be so fettered by usage and custom, as not to adopt whatever is good though ever so novel; nor will he be so in love with novelty as to cut himself away from all the associations and attainments of the Past.

The wise teacher will bring forth much that is OLD — because the essential substance of truth is always old. The great experiences, duties, sorrows, hopes, temptations and blessings of life, are all old. The human heart is always the same; its great needs the same. Sin and reconciliation, repentance and faith, pardon and obedience, judgment and eternity, the love of God and the love of Jesus — these are and must be the great themes of the preacher. If the preacher's business were speculation, he might desert these subjects, for those less hackneyed; but his business is more than speculation, it is action. He stands in the pulpit

to *act* upon those before him, to move them to penitence, to a higher purpose, to a holy life. Then he must run, not as uncertainty; he must fight, not as those who beat the air. Men do not strike for the sake of striking, but for the sake of hitting. So a man ought not to preach for the sake of preaching, but in order to do a work in the souls of his hearers. If this *be* his object, he will soon find that the originality he needs is not to have new themes and subjects, but to treat the old ones with fresh feelings and a sincere thought; to speak not from hearsay, not by rote, but from experience; to speak as if flesh and blood had not revealed it to him, but his Father in Heaven. This originality the hearer has a right to demand; he has a right to ask that his teacher shall speak from the sincere and spontaneous convictions of his *own* soul, and not in conventional common-places; and this he may do while treating the oldest themes.

The wise teacher will also study carefully the old doctrines of the church, believing that he will find in all of them something true and useful. He does not believe that any opinion widely received and long retained by his fellow-men can be pure error. He knows that a lie cannot live, that it is only the truth mixed with it which can give it an enduring vitality. Therefore he will not speak with contempt or sweeping censure of the old doctrines which appear to him unintelligible or absurd, but study them again, if perchance he may understand them better. For myself, I have learned to

find valuable truth in almost every doctrine which once seemed to me purely erroneous. The Trinity, the Deity of Christ, Total Depravity, the Atonement, Decrees, do not appear to me to be logically true as they are stated in the creeds, but they all contain important truth, and it would be very foolish not to find it and use it. Thus, for instance, though I cannot agree with those who call Christ God, I agree with what they *mean* in calling him so. *I* also find in Christ, a manifestation of God; I find God in Christ reconciling the world unto himself; I see in Christ such an image of the invisible God, as I cannot find elsewhere, and so Christ's acts and words, and character, are to me the character and words, and acts of his Father, and having seen him I have seen the Father. I would go therefore to these old doctrines, and study them, hoping in all to find some truth, because all widely received doctrines have, as it were, the stamp of humanity upon them.

And even old language and phrases are not lightly to be rejected, though they have become hackneyed, and their original sense has been obscured by cant and error. For some words are the *very* words to express certain thoughts, and it is better to restore to them their original meaning and freshness, than to relinquish their use. It is weakness to suffer yourself to be robbed of the best language and best thoughts, because they have been perverted and abused by others. The stronger a man is, the less he will be influenced by the false spirit of his

age directly or indirectly. He will neither yield to it, nor in resisting it, will he permit himself to give up the truth which actually belongs to it.

So much for the old.

Let us now briefly ask why the well-instructed scribe or Christian teacher, should bring from his treasury things NEW.

If there be any truth in what the apostle says, that in Christ "dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" — it is very evident that no one has ever adequately comprehended the mind of Christ. If Luther and Calvin, and Wesley and Priestley were not infallible, then they did not see every thing, and some things they may have seen falsely, and therefore we ought to look beyond what they saw and said. If God has made man to improve, and subjected him to the law of progress, is there any reason why he should not improve in religious knowledge as in other knowledge? If Paul did not consider himself to have attained or to be already perfect, and exhorted Christians to leave the first principles, and learn to comprehend the length and breadth and depth and height of the knowledge of God and Christ, who will say that *we* have attained and may now stand still? Looking, with the aid of history, at past ages of the church, in which do we not find false theology, false philosophy, and, as a consequence, a narrow and unhealthy piety? And why should *we* have no errors to correct, nothing to learn, no new ideas to adopt now?

I should be ashamed to ask questions like these, the answers to which are the merest truisms, did I not know that there is just as much need of their being asked and considered as ever. The same spirit, which, in all ages of the church, has sought to fetter the human mind, and say to it "hitherto shalt thou go and no further" — the spirit, which, first by the dungeon and stake, and since, by denunciation and slander, has always endeavored to frighten the earnest mind from wandering out of the old paths — the same spirit which has made long creeds and articles of faith, in order to rivet them, like manacles, on the intellect — the spirit which was always so nobly resisted by one, who, in this place, ever contended manfully for freedom of mind,[1] and who was too early taken from among us, the same spirit is still alive and active, and needs to be opposed as much now as ever. Men are still afraid of every thing new in theology — still denounce every innovation as heresy and infidelity. If he, to whom I have alluded, were still here, it would not be necessary for any voice to be raised in this place in behalf of freedom, for he was always its ready champion; yet, like the well-instructed scribe, ready also to bring forth things old as well as new, from the well-furnished storehouse of his thought.

I am no friend to reckless innovation, but yet I cannot but think, that we are still too much afraid

[1] Rev. Bernard Whitman, formerly minister in Waltham.

of novelty. We are timid, because we are unbelieving. We think that every new doctrine is to upturn the foundations of Christianity, because we have little faith in Christianity. We think it built on custom, on authority, on prescription; we wonder how it can have stood as long as it has, and do not know how deep its foundations lie in the wants and nature of the human soul. We are startled also by each new mental phenomenon, because we have no faith in Providence, and do not know that the Lord reigns in the intellectual and spiritual world as well as in the material, and that each reform, each new doctrine or philosophy, comes in its time and never before its time. To us then may still be said, "Why are ye so fearful, O ye of little faith?"

To me, I confess, the greatest danger seems to be of listless conformity, of dead orthodoxy, of blind acquiescence in the old words, of blind walking in the old routine. Our indolence, our cowardice, the power of habit and association, reverence for the opinions of the good and wise who have lived before us, the difficulty and loneliness of solitary thought, the ease and pleasantness of going with the multitude, all these powerful motives are on the side of conservatism. Reform has to break through the soil of old custom, to force its way against the combined resistance of religious indifference and religious prejudice, to go sounding on its dim and perilous path where there are no landmarks, no foot tracks. Conservatism is, therefore, usually

more than a match for reform, and it is only when a reform has become absolutely necessary, that it can succeed against the obstacles opposed to it.

These remarks seem to me to be called for, especially at the present time. Recent developments of thought in our own community, have excited fears and given occasion for denunciations, which I think equally improper and unwise. A theology has come up among us, which has been called the transcendental theology, which advocates strongly the claims of the human soul, contends for the largest individual liberty, and makes religion a matter wholly inward and spiritual. I think that these views came up among us, not by accident, but in the operation of God's great laws, — they came because they were wanted just here and exactly now. The religious community had come to be divided here into those holding two systems, one of which tended to make religion consist in holding fast certain opinions, in going through certain ceremonies, in cherishing certain feelings — the other, in the performance of duty, and in a morality of much too outward a character. Both sought to be justified by works rather than by faith; the one by religious works, the other by moral works. According to both systems, the free soul of man was bowed beneath a yoke of opinions, usages, and outward practices; and Christianity was not enough regarded as lying in the state of the soul, and in its inward union with God. A

doctrine was needed to teach these truths — it came — and I, for one, welcome it.

"But," it may be asked, "do you agree with all the doctrines of the transcendentalists?" I do not. I consider much which they say narrow and defective, some things absurd, some things false and injurious. But what then? I find error and deficiency on all sides, in all systems. Just as I study orthodoxy, and read the writings of Moses Stuart, of Jacob Abbot, of Baxter and Wesley, in the hopes of learning something profitable, though I do not admit all they say, so I would read and hear the mystical and spiritual writers, not accepting all they say, but yet hoping to learn something, also, from them.

"But," it may still further be objected, "these views go to the very foundations of Christianity; they affect the very essence of religion. When men deny the authority of Jesus, reject his mediation, teach that every body is inspired as he was, and deny the authority of the Bible, it seems to us that these views are essentially infidel, and not to be tolerated."

To all this I have one simple answer. There is a body of Christians, whose piety and faith no one would now deny, who have gone a great deal farther than modern transcendentalists, in exalting the soul at the expense of outward religion. They have abolished the Lord's supper, and baptism, and the Sabbath, as outward institutions. They claim

an inspiration like that of Christ and his apostles. They deny the authority usually asserted for the Bible. I allude to the Quakers, who have gone all this length, yet no one questions their Christianity, because we see that, with all this, their lives and hearts are the temples of God.

In all such assertions of the transcendentalists I can see a truth, though, as they state them, I think them erroneous. When, for example, they deny that Jesus is a mediator, or that the soul needs any mediator between itself and God, they mean to oppose those views of Christ which make him take the place of the Father in the Christian heart, which make him seem more merciful and lovely than God, and so cause him to come between man and God, to separate rather than to unite. Yet that Jesus is truly a mediator, I firmly believe, and that the soul needs a mediator. For, according even to the common usage of the term, a mediator is one who comes between, in order to unite and reconcile, not to divide: according to the Scripture usage of the term, Christ comes between man and God, to reconcile the sinner to his Father, and make them one. And, according to the stern and sad fact, man *is* alienated from God, *does* need a mediator to bring him back to God, and no one can deny that those who believe in Christ as a mediator, have generally a closer walk with God than those who are indifferent to such a mediation. In this, therefore, and all the other as-

sertions of the transcendentalists, I would take the truth, and leave the error.

Let the wise teacher, then, go to the old school and to the new, in search of truth. Let him not be afraid to be called too orthodox; let him not be afraid of being called too liberal. By taking such a course, he may, indeed, dissatisfy all parties. By refusing to be a partisan, he may be considered a time-server, and please no one. Ultra reformers, if he do not take part with them, will call him timid, though his whole life before were a battle. Ultra conservatives, if he do not join in their clamor against new men and measures, will call him a deist or an atheist, though his whole life has been given to preaching Christ and God. He may be misunderstood by all, even by his nearest friends. What matters it? God will not misunderstand him; the truly wise will not forever mistake him; and he will have the satisfaction, which the mere partisan can never have, of feeling that he stands on firm ground; that he has not wilfully omitted any important truth; and that he has thus gained a power of doing good which any narrower process could never give.

My friends, I can ask no better blessing for you than that the teachers whom you install to-day, may speak to you in the spirit I have now attempted to describe. Manly without rashness, bold yet cautious, looking everywhere for light, and with a firm faith in truth and God, may they speak to you whatever things are true, and solemn, and soul-

stirring, whether new or old. And may you encourage them in this course, and with a firm faith in God's overruling Providence, be free from all anxieties, and be built up abundantly in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior. And in that great and terrible day, when those who speak and those who hear shall stand to give an account to God for their opportunities, may it appear that your teachers have spoken faithfully, and that you have hearkened wisely.

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